

# United States Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management

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Environmental Assessment DOI-BLM-MT-L060-2015-0004-EA

## Finding of No Significant Impact North Moccasins Forest Health Restoration Project

***Location:***

T. 18 N., R. 17 E., sections 24, 25 and 26 (portions of)

T. 18 N., R. 18 E., sections 30 and 31 (portions of)

Fergus County, Montana



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# **Finding of No Significant Impact**

## **Lewistown Field Office**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has conducted an environmental analysis (EA No. MT-L060-2015-0004-EA) for a proposed action to address Forest Health Restoration in the North Moccasins Mountain Range located Northeast of Lewistown, MT in Fergus County. The project would improve stand resiliency and diversity on BLM managed public land by reducing stand densities and removing insect and disease damaged timber, restoring stands of Aspen and hardwood shrubs and facilitating the regeneration of new tree seedlings through site preparation. Additionally, these treatments would provide for increased recreational opportunities and reduced impacts from soil erosion while maintaining/improve wildlife habitat.

The underlying need for the proposal would be met while accomplishing the following objectives:

- Reduce stand density of conifer trees to decrease the risk of epidemic level insect attacks and/or catastrophic wildfire. Specifically: Remove dead and dying Lodgepole pine and Douglas-fir and thin forested stands that have not yet been attacked by insect and disease and reduce the level of hazardous fuel buildup in order to minimize the risk of catastrophic fires;
- Design treatments and silvicultural prescriptions that encourage expansion of Aspen trees, shrubs, and key forage species along with providing for open spaces for wildlife;
- Retain large trees, snags and untreated areas for structural diversity and wildlife habitat;
- Decrease the potential for a catastrophic wildfire by reducing hazardous fuel loadings;
- Obliterate/reclaim and stabilize unnecessary roads and trails as well as developing and maintaining some open roads and trails for additional recreational activities;
- Provide wood products for the local economy.

The 1200 acre North Moccasins Forest Health project area, located in Fergus County approximately 10 miles northeast of Lewistown, Montana in the North Moccasins mountain range EA #DOI-BLM-MT-L060-2015-0004-EA available at the Lewistown Field Office, is incorporated by reference for this Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI). A no action alternative and one other action alternative were analyzed in the EA.

### **PLAN CONFORMANCE AND CONSISTENCY:**

The proposed action identified in this Environmental Analysis (EA) conforms to the Judith Valley Phillips Resource Management Plan (JVP RMP), page 25 (1994). In addition, this action is in conformance with the Fire/Fuels Management Plan Environmental Assessment/Plan Amendment for Montana and the Dakotas 2003.

## **FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT DETERMINATION:**

Based upon a review of the EA and the supporting documents, I have determined that the project is not a major federal action and will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment, individually or cumulatively with other actions in the general area. No environmental effects meet the definition of significance in context or intensity as defined in 40 CFR 1508.27 and do not exceed those effects described in the Judith Valley Phillips Resource Management Plan. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not needed. This finding is based on the context and intensity of the project as described:

**Context:** The project is a site-specific action directly involving approximately 1200 acres of BLM administered land that by itself does not have international, national, regional, or state-wide importance. The Proposed Action would likely cause a short term displacement of wildlife and localized impacts to soils such as compaction and erosion. However, these impacts would diminish over time as vegetation recovers. BMPs and project design features would also serve to minimize soil impacts. Scenic and recreational values could be temporarily degraded until reclamation and stabilization of cut and fill slopes occur and native vegetation and timber re-establish themselves. There would be some minimal fire scaring associated with the prescribed fire treatments.

**Intensity:** The following discussion is organized around the Ten Significance Criteria described in 40 CFR 1508.27 and incorporated into BLM's Critical Elements of the Human Environment list (H-1790-1), and supplemental Instruction Memorandum, Acts, regulations and Executive Orders. The following have been considered in evaluating intensity for this proposal:

- 1. Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse.** The proposed action would affect resources as described in the EA. Mitigating measures to reduce impacts especially to invasive and non-native weed species, threatened, endangered, or candidate animal species, fish and wildlife special status species, fuels and fire management, forestry, recreation, visual resources, soils and wildlife were incorporated in the design of the proposed action. None of the environmental effects discussed in detail in the EA and associated appendices are considered significant, nor do the effects exceed those described in the North Moccasins Forest Health Environmental Assessment. Long term effects are expected to be beneficial.
- 2. The degree to which the selected alternative will affect public health or safety.** The continued shift of forest stands towards climax, along with the increased stand densities and infestations of insect and disease, provides a readily available fuel source for a catastrophic wildfire. Without treatment the expected fire type would be a stand-replacement crown fire that is outside the historical range of variability due to a continuous fuel bed leading from the ground into adjacent overstocked stands with ladder fuels and a closed canopy. The proposed action is designed to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire that would threaten human life, private property, and structures as well as mitigate the threat of insects and disease spreading to adjacent ownerships.

3. **Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farm lands, wetlands, wilderness, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas:** The following critical elements of the human environment and other resource issues are not affected because they are not present in the project area: cultural resources, areas of critical environmental concern, (ACEC's); environmental justice, farmlands, (unique and prime), floodplains, native American religious concerns, wastes, (hazardous or solid), wild and scenic rivers and wilderness areas. In addition, the following critical elements of the human environment and other resource issues, although present, would not be affected significantly by this proposed action for the reasons discussed in Chapter 3 of EA# MT-L060-2015-0004-EA: air quality, invasive, non-native weed species, water quality, (drinking/ground), wetlands/riparian zones, climate change, fuels and fire management, fish and wildlife including special status species, lands and access, livestock grazing, recreation, socioeconomics, soils, visual resource management, woodlands/forestry and wildlife.
4. **The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.** The public scoping process included press releases, news articles, internet posting, presentations to the Resource Advisory Council and meetings with individual landowners and cooperating agencies. There has been no controversy and/or comments that would indicate controversy.
5. **The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.** The project is not unique or unusual. The BLM has experience implementing similar actions in similar areas. The environmental effects to the human environment are fully analyzed in the EA. There are no predicted effects on the human environment that are considered to be highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks
6. **The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.** The actions considered in the preferred alternative were considered by the interdisciplinary team within the context of past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions. Significant cumulative effects are not predicted. Scattered tracts of private, state lands and public land have had varying degrees of commercial and non-commercial timber cutting in the past 15-20 years. Special forest products permits continue to be issued for personal uses such as post/pole, Christmas Trees and firewood. These areas of past cutting have re-vegetated with grasses, shrubs, forbs, and trees and show no signs of degradation.
7. **Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts – which include connected actions regardless of land ownership.** The interdisciplinary team evaluated the possible actions in context of past, present and reasonably foreseeable actions. Past commercial and non-commercial cutting activities have not caused significant impacts. Several small private landowners have expressed interest in silvicultural

treatments in conjunction with the proposed activities on BLM land. At least one adjacent landowner has indicated a desire to obtain a Right of Way across BLM lands on one of the new proposed roads. Significant cumulative effects are not predicted.

**8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or other objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.** The project will not adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or other objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, nor will it cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. A cultural inventory has been completed for the proposed action, and no cultural resources were found.

**9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, or the degree to which the action may adversely affect: 1) a proposed to be listed endangered or threatened species or its habitat, or 2) a species on BLM's sensitive species list.** Mitigating measures to reduce impacts to wildlife and fisheries have been incorporated into the design of the action alternatives. No threatened or endangered plants or animals are known to occur in the area. A formal Section 7 ESA Consultation was not required by USF&WS.

**10. Whether the action threatens a violation of a federal, state, local, or tribal law, regulation or policy imposed for the protection of the environment, where non-federal requirements are consistent with federal requirements.** The project does not violate any known federal, state, local or tribal law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment. State, local, and tribal interests were given the opportunity to participate in the environmental analysis process. No Native American Religious Concerns are known in the area and none have been noted by Tribal authorities. Should recommended inventories or future consultations with Tribal authorities reveal the existence of such sensitive properties, appropriate mitigation and/or protection measures may be undertaken. In addition, the project is consistent with applicable land management plans, policies, and programs.

( Signature on file)

Authorized Officer

3/4/2016

Date